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Iraq's Dissidents [redacted]

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Iraq's Dissidents

A Research Paper

Information available as of 8 June 1981 has been used in the preparation of this report.

This paper was prepared by Arabian Peninsula–Iraq Branch, Near East South Asia Division, Office of Political Analysis. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Near East South Asia Division, OPA,

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Iraq's Dissidents

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Overview

Iraq's opposition groups have been encouraged by Baghdad's war with Iran and increased aid from Iraq's enemies. But their ability to act against the regime at home is undermined by President Saddam Hussein's efficient internal security apparatus. Their effectiveness is further eroded by factionalism, personal rivalries, corruption, and competition for outside support and recognition. The principal foreign supporters of Iraqi dissidents—Iran, Syria, and Libya—contribute to the disarray by manipulating the dissidents for their own narrow and sometimes conflicting purposes. The USSR does not appear to be aiding Iraq's dissidents directly, although Soviet arms and possibly funds are channeled to them through East European and Palestinian surrogates.

The disarray in the dissidents' camp has allowed Saddam Hussein time to deal first with the war and then with internal dissent. Over the long term, however, a prolonged and inconclusive war with Iran followed by a peace that must inevitably fall short of Hussein's highly touted war aims will heighten tensions—never far from the surface in Iraq—and create new opportunities for the various dissident groups.

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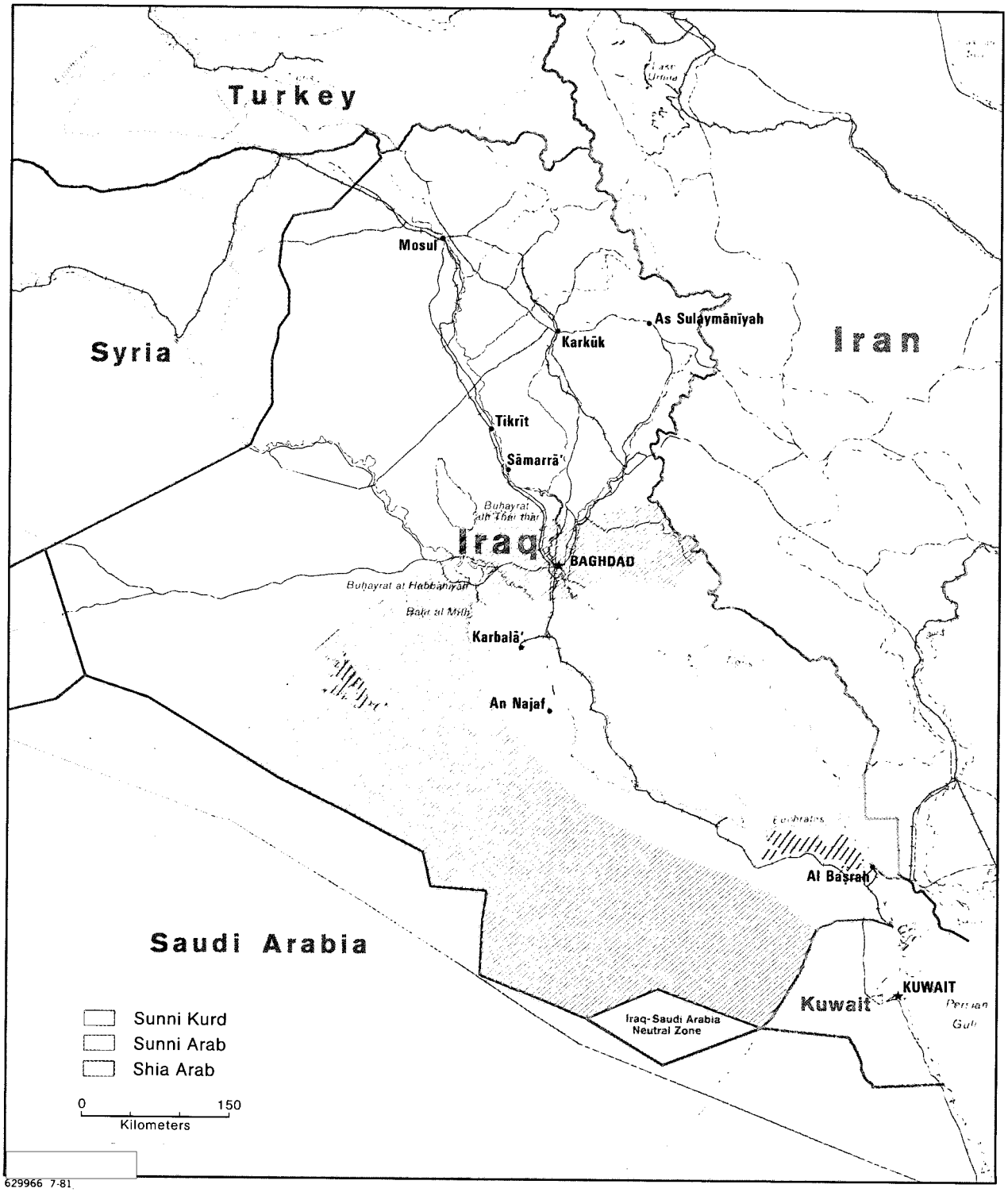
Major Ethnic Groups



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Iraq's Dissidents

The Groups

Iraq's opposition groups are a diverse lot—renegade Ba'thists and Communists, Sunnis and Shias, Arabs and Kurds. They reflect the country's varied ethnic and religious communities, and many share similar goals. These include the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and the Ba'th Party and the opening up of the political process. They talk about free elections, an open press, and representative institutions and profess to support Kurdish self-determination as well as equal rights for minority groups. Yet they are unable to cooperate on the most elemental level or to agree on a basic political program.

The inability of the dissident groups to work together to a large extent reflects the problems of operating in an isolated and alien environment, dependent on foreign largesse and on the whims of the host government. They have the potential to appeal to large segments of the Iraqi population, but with two significant exceptions have no real power bases in the country. The two exceptions are the Kurds and the Shias, which together make up 75 percent of Iraq's population.

Iraq's dissident movement is split into at least six "front" organizations, with partially interchangeable memberships. These include the National Islamic Liberation Front, a coalition of Shia leaders, retired military officers, and Kurds based in Tehran and Damascus; the National Democratic and Patriotic Front, a Syrian-fostered amalgam of Kurdish and Arab leftists, renegade Ba'thists, and Communists; the Tehran-based League of Religious Scholars; a Libyan-funded front claiming Arab, Kurdish, and Islamic connections; a Kurdish-Communist grouping composed of members of the other fronts; and another Tehran-inspired Shia front with more Iranian than Iraqi supporters.

More important than the fronts, which to a great extent are paper organizations, are their component parts. The most significant groups are the Shia Dawa Party, the Kurdish Democratic Party, and the Iraqi Communist Party. None has the capability to overthrow Saddam Hussein's government by itself; in tandem, they would pose a formidable threat.

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The Shia Opposition

Iraq's Shia community—55 percent of the population—has long viewed itself as politically disfranchised and economically disadvantaged. It has been excluded from power partly by choice—Shias have opposed every Iraqi Government since the first one created by the British in 1920. The Shias have been influenced by a small number of religious leaders and itinerant divines, many of Iranian origin, who have lived in Iraq's holy cities of Najaf, Karbala, Sammara, and Baghdad for generations. Members of their families—the Sadr, Hakim, Shirazi, Tabatabai, and Khalisi—dominate the Shia dissident movement today

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The largest and most influential Shia opposition group is the Dawa Party, founded in the 1960s by younger Shia activists unhappy with the continuing pattern of discrimination and political repression. Its leaders include Mahdi al-Hakim, the blind son of a prominent religious figure executed by Baghdad in 1970; his brother Muhammad Baqr, arrested for his role in Shia rioting during Ramadhan in February 1977; and Mahdi al-Khalisi. They had close ties to missing Lebanese Shia religious leader Musa Sadr and the late Muhammad Baqr Sadr, a prominent Iraqi Shia religious figure executed in 1980 for his alleged leadership of Dawa.

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Dawa probably receives the bulk of its support from wealthy exile communities in Jordan, the Gulf states, and Europe. Its other major sources of support are Iran and membership in the National Islamic Liberation Front (NILF). Tehran provides Dawa leaders with financial aid, arms, safe haven, and training for its paramilitary unit, the Mujahiddin or holy warriors. Dawa leader Mahdi al-Hakim reportedly is considering reducing his involvement with key non-Shia members of the NILF and may be rethinking his relationship with Iran. His dissatisfaction stems from:

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- The overbearing personal ambitions of the NILF's military leadership, which is dominated by exiled senior Sunni officers.
- The recurring suggestion that Iraqi Communists and other leftists be included in the NILF.
- Reports that at least one NILF leader and his associates have been selling for personal gain weapons given to the Front by Syria and Iran.
- Suspicions that Tehran is manipulating Dawa while supporting rival Shia dissident leader Muhammad al-Shirazi

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To counter Iranian influence and the fellow conspirators he mistrusts, Mahdi al-Hakim is developing an independent relationship with Rifaat al-Assad, brother of Syrian President Hafiz al-Assad, commander of Syria's elite Defense Companies and the focal point of Damascus's anti-Saddam operations.

Wide World ©

Masud Barzani leads tribesmen back to Iraq, July 1979.

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Shia dissident activities in Iraq increased in March after a long standdown, but activity is episodic and more an irritant than a threat. The operations appear to be limited to hit-and-run attacks on police posts and random shootings in Baghdad and Basrah. Shia activists may also have been responsible for a prison riot in Basrah and reportedly are cooperating with the Iranian military in attacks on Iraqi military units in Khuzestan. Constant surveillance, mass arrests, and executions of suspected Shia activists by Iraqi security keep Dawa weak inside Iraq.

The Kurds

Iraq's Kurdish dissidents have increased operations in northern Iraq since the start of the Iran-Iraq war in the hope of extracting political concessions from Baghdad. They have increased their attacks on isolated security posts and communications links, are probably responsible for sabotaging some oil facilities, and are expanding their contacts with other antiregime dissidents. Iraq's Kurdish rebels have the greatest number of armed supporters of all the dissident groups, perhaps as many as 15,000. Deep-seated enmity between leaders, tribal differences, and chronic infighting among the factions, however, hamper their effectiveness.

Two factions dominate Iraqi Kurdish politics in exile—the Iraqi Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP), led by Masud and Idris Barzani, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), led by Jalal Talabani. Their goals are similar; both would accept an accommodation with Baghdad in exchange for meaningful political and economic autonomy and recognition of their party's hegemony over the Kurdish community. Differences between the two factions mostly concern rivalry for leadership of Iraq's Kurds and competition for local support. These have kept Talabani and the Barzanis at odds for the past decade and seem to preclude their cooperating now.

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Masud and Idris Barzani, sons of the late Kurdish chieftain Mulla Mustafa Barzani and onetime allies of the shah and Israel, head the oldest and largest of Iraq's Kurdish groups. Their headquarters has been in Iran since the end of the 1974-75 rebellion, but they also operate from bases inside Iraq. The Barzanis have worked closely with the Khomeini regime against Iraq. Their forces receive a financial subsidy and weapons from Iran, arrangements similar to those made with the shah.

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Talabani, who is a leftist, was a member of the KDP, but broke with the Barzanis in the mid-1970s. His base of operations and source of support over the years has been Syria. Damascus's aid to Talabani has been erratic, reflecting Syria's fluctuating relations with Iraq. Syrian support to Talabani improves as relations between the two states deteriorate. As relations with

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Baghdad soured in the summer of 1979, Damascus encouraged him to join a Syrian-orchestrated anti-Baghdad front. Talabani announced the establishment of the National Democratic and Patriotic Front (NDPF—sometimes called the National Pan Arab Democratic Front) with representatives of the Iraqi Communist Party and the Syrian Ba'th Party.

Damascus has also intervened on Talabani's behalf with Tehran and Tripoli to facilitate military assistance for the Iraqi dissident. Talabani's relations with Tehran are poor because of his contacts with Iranian Kurdish dissidents, leftists, and Communists.

There are other Kurdish factions—the Kurdish Democratic Socialist Party led by Mahmud Uthman, Ali Sinjari's Kurdish Democratic Union, and Muhammad Mahmud Abd al-Rahman's United Kurdistan Party. All are involved in antiregime operations. Along with the Barzani and Talabani groups, they regularly align and realign themselves in kaleidescopic fashion with each other, with the religious right wing, and with the Communists. Their need to rebuild assets in Iraq and acquire arms and money takes precedence over ideology. Masud Barzani purged—allegedly at Tehran's request—the KDP of all Communists/leftists, including Ali Sinjari, Mahmud Uthman, and possibly Muhammad Mahmud Abd al-Rahman—last winter. The KDP is a member of the NILF—which professes an abhorrence of leftist alliances-

Iraq's Communists

Arrests, executions, defections, and factional infighting since 1979 have decimated Communist ranks in Iraq, but the party survives, especially in the Kurdish north. The CPI is taking advantage of Baghdad's preoccupation with the war to infiltrate small groups for eventual guerrilla activities and is trying to rebuild its domestic organization. Its leaders in the meantime are in exile, discredited by the failure of the party's Moscow-directed policy of the early 1970s that called for cooperation with the Ba'thists in a National Front government.

The CPI, which is one of Iraq's oldest political parties, is divided into several factions. All are located outside Iraq except for small bands of guerrillas—about 400 to 500—who are operating in the north alongside the Kurdish groups. The factions include the so-called Old Guard, or pro-Moscow party traditionalists, led by Secretary General Aziz Muhammad from his exile in Moscow; a Kurdish group led by Umar Shaykh Ali and Baha al-Din Nuri; a very small Shia group possibly centered around Basrah and led by Baqr al-Musawi; and a faction based in Syria cooperating with Damascus and the NDPF

CPI strategy—if there is one—seems to be focused on cooperating with any and all dissident factions while trying to unify them in a common front against Saddam Hussein. The CPI has so far succeeded in its first objective; it has been cooperating in joint political and military ventures with the KDP and the PUK,

The second objective—unification of the anti-Baghdad factions—has proved far more elusive. Jalal Talabani has rejected Communist attempts to ally him or the NDPF with the Barzanis; he may have withdrawn his units from operations with the CPI inside Iraq, leaving the Iraqi Communist units even more vulnerable targets for Iraqi security. Shia religious leaders adamantly refuse to consider joining forces with either the Communists or the various, vaguely defined Arab leftists.

Moscow is sheltering much of the Iraqi Communist Party leadership and facilitating communication between party leaders in exile and cadre still in the region. The Soviets have issued guidelines for CPI cadre in Iraq but seem reluctant to intervene in the party's leadership crisis. Moscow would prefer a new leadership that would combine elements of the Kurdish and Shia groups still active in Iraq.

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Foreign Involvement

Iraq's dissidents are vying for support from the same sources—Iran, Syria, and Libya. The competition for foreign money and arms is not only between factions but from within the same movement as well.

Iran is providing aid to the NILF, the Dawa Party, and the Barzani KDP. It has allowed Jalal Talabani to use Iranian territory to stage raids on Iraq

Iraqi dissidents are aware of the risks entailed by too close ties to Tehran. Potential supporters in Iraq will not be enthusiastic about aiding so-called nationalist movements that receive aid and comfort from the Persian enemy. The religious-minded groups, like Dawa, may see the Iranian revolution as an ideal to emulate but realize the limits of its attractiveness for Iraq's mixed population (Iran is 97 percent Shia, but Iraq is only 55 percent Shia). An Iraqi Islamic Republic constructed along Iranian lines would not appeal to other ethnic or religious groups in Iraq and might even offend the more secular-minded Shias who do not want to see Iran's political and economic chaos repeated in Iraq.

Syria is the primary patron of the Iraqi left but is aiding Dawa and the NILF as well. Damascus has long sheltered Ba'thists who are out of favor in Baghdad

Damascus however, has not, allowed the dissidents to launch attacks across its borders with Iraq.

Iraq's dissidents realize Syrian self-interest is best served by prolonging the war and sniping at Saddam while avoiding a direct confrontation with the Iraqi Government. They know that Syrian aid can be fickle and will be limited by Syria's lack of financial resources and its involvement in the current Lebanese crisis.

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Libyan leader Mu'ammar Qadhafi's motives in aiding Iraqi dissidents seem obvious—rivalry with Saddam Hussein, anger over Iraq's abandonment of the Steadfastness Front and radical Arabism, and identification with the Islamic resurgence that triggered the Iranian revolution. But Qadhafi, like Assad, can be fickle.

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Libya is currently aiding, or promising to aid, the NDPF and NILF. Blamed by Iraqi and Iranian Shias for the disappearance of Imam Musa Sadr, Qadhafi favors aid to nationalist and leftist opposition figures; he disagrees with Iran over aid to the religious factions and argues occasionally that a nonsectarian Islamic revolution is best for Iraq.

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Soviet aid to Iraq's dissidents is less tangible. Moscow provides safe haven for Communist Party exiles and Kurdish leftists, but does not appear to be directly aiding or arming Iraqi opposition groups. The Kurds as well as the Communists and the Shia factions have Soviet-made weapons, but these are supplied for the most part by Syria, Libya, and pro-Soviet Palestinian groups or stolen from Iraqi units. There is no evidence that Moscow is urging Damascus, Tripoli, or Tehran to aid the Iraqis. Nevertheless, Baghdad suspects that the Soviet and East European assistance flowing to the dissidents comes with Moscow's blessing and instructions.

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Outlook

Prospects for Iraq's dissidents to overthrow the government of Saddam Hussein are bleak unless they can coalesce. The war has released sectarian tensions, but it has also produced a grudging support for the regime. This is to a large extent by default—there is no great admiration for Saddam Hussein, but he is the leader in a national crisis against the ancient Persian enemy in a battle fraught with ethnic and racial overtones. He—and by extension the Ba'th Party—are still preferable for many Iraqis to unknown rule by a military dictatorship or government by mullah.

Iraq is not prerevolutionary Iran. Iraq's dissidents are not similar to the Iranian factions, which were able to unite around the Ayatollah Khomeini and a simple theme of removing the shah. This situation could change if Iraq is clumsy enough to produce a major and popular figure through exile or martyrdom. The late Shia leader Muhammad Baqr Sadr was not well known. Former President Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr—retired in June 1979 ostensibly for health reasons—remains popular, but he is apparently under virtual house arrest; his contacts with friends and potential supporters are strictly limited.

We lack detailed information on the two greatest sources of threat to Saddam Hussein—those within the Ba'th Party and the military. Saddam has been thorough in eliminating potential rivals within the party, and there does not appear to be a military figure or government official willing to challenge him. Sources of dispute are Saddam's anti-Syrian policies, his growing ties to Arab conservatives and the West, and deterioration of the link with Moscow. The military may be chafing because of civilian brakes on its war effort. Officers who were retired early in their careers because of political unreliability but returned to service during the war may not want to see politicization of the military resumed with the war's end

It is hard to imagine Iraqis rallying around exiled opposition leaders like the Barzanis, General Naqib, or Mahdi al-Hakim. Iraq's Kurdish community—approximately 20 percent of the country's 13 million people—is divided by Baghdad's tactics of allowing minor political concessions, such as the election of a legislative council for the three predominantly Kurdish provinces that form Iraqi Kurdistan, by Saddam's

Sygma ©

President Saddam Hussein at prayer in June 1980.

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support for Iranian Kurds opposed to the Khomeini regime, and by the sizable economic investment being made in the region. They view the political reforms introduced by Baghdad as cosmetic, but Saddam's secular socialism is preferable to the prospect of Iranian-oriented Shia domination. The Barzanis, once discredited by their ties to the shah and the US, run the risk of alienating anew Iraq's Kurds by their cooperation with Tehran against Iran's Kurds. Nor is Jalal Talabani's kidnaping of students in Iraqi Kurdestan to provide him recruits calculated to win him the support of the Kurdish community. At present, the internecine warfare between the two major Kurdish groups is hurting them more than any damage Baghdad can inflict on them

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Saddam has responded to the increased threat of subversion with a campaign of unremitting repression of real and suspected opponents. Over the past two years security forces have jailed, executed, or expelled from the country more than 40,000 Iraqis, in particular Iranian origin Shias, Communists, and anyone suspected of Dawa Party membership. The policy of repression has succeeded in largely eliminating serious opposition activity inside Iraq and intimidating potential opponents. It has not been able to prevent urban

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terrorism directed against the Ba'th Party and government officials or a modest upsurge of guerrilla activity in Iraqi Kurdistan.

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Diplomats in Baghdad report "quiet grumblings" about the "purposelessness" of the war, especially among the Shias. If anything, the war has renewed Sunni-Shia tensions, but younger Shias seem less influenced by religious differences than their elders. The public mood appears to be one of dogged resignation to the current situation, public recognition that the government is working hard to shield the people from severe economic hardship, that Baghdad's terms for peace are moderate and constructive, and that Iran's uncompromising attitude is the main cause of prolonging the war. This apparent passivity will not survive the end of the war, and Iraq's ethnic and religious communities will continue to provide a breeding ground for dissident groups.

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